

Research Report

The Michigan Family Independence Agency's Centrally Coordinated Hiring Pool and Exit Interviewing

Prepared by:



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CCHP and the Exit Interview/ Survey

When the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) introduced its innovative Centrally Coordinated Hiring Pool (CCHP) process in January 1999, they believed that it would help reduce employee turnover. FIA had been experiencing high levels of turnover, particularly among its Children's Protective Services and Foster Care workers. With the CCHP implementation, the FIA expected vacancy rates to drop significantly, resulting in fewer uncovered caseloads, more manageable workloads, less stress and ultimately, reduced turnover.

Turnover in the child welfare workforce is driven by a number of factors, requiring a variety of remedial strategies. Although high caseloads, low pay, and employee burnout are often cited as being among the major contributors, the specific causes of high turnover vary across organizations. If properly administered and utilized, the Exit Interview/Survey – typically given to departing employees – can provide organizations with valuable information about the specific reasons for employee turnover.

In the mid 1990s, the FIA developed an exit survey procedure, but they have not administered it consistently and the response rate has been poor (see Attachment 1, page L-5, for a sample). FIA does not believe that its process has provided the quality of information needed to determine and implement the additional strategies necessary to reduce turnover. As part of the grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the FIA requested CPS Human Resource Services (CPS) to survey the literature on the Exit Interview/Survey (EIS) and make specific recommendations for improvement.

Literature Review

Most of what has been written about EIS in the past thirty years can be divided into two categories: academic research and practical applications.

The academic research has largely focused on validity and reliability of EIS results. Obviously, EIS data is useful as a management tool only if the responses provided by departing employees accurately and truthfully reflect the real reasons why they are leaving the organization. One study from the late 1960s revealed that only 41 percent of employees who were surveyed three months after terminating their employment identified the same reasons for leaving as they did during the exit interview conducted at the time of their departure. In fact, the 14 percent who had indicated during the exit interview that they were leaving “for no specific reason,” all identified a specific reason during the follow up survey.

Much of the more recent research has been devoted to identifying those factors that impact the validity and reliability of employee responses in the EIS process. Some of the major findings

from a number of different studies suggest that employees are more likely to give candid feedback when:

- They are provided with assurances that their reasons for leaving are kept confidential and aggregated in summary reports.
- They are offered specific assurances that they will be protected from supervisory retaliation, such as negative references and poor treatment of coworkers who stay behind.
- They believe that the organization has fixed past problems systematically identified in the EIS process.
- They believe the reasons for leaving the organization can be provided in a non-confrontational way (i.e., some employees are unwilling to confront any management representative with what they disliked about the organization, but would be willing to provide that information in an anonymous survey or to a neutral third party paid by the organization).

The research also suggests that some employees need time to sort out the reasons that brought them to the decision to leave an organization. Sometimes the real reasons may not surface until several weeks after departure.

Much of the practical applications of EIS are based on the experiences of Human Resource (HR) practitioners and consultants. In reviewing trade journals and HR publications, we found that there is a general consensus on much of the practical advice:

- A properly conducted EIS can provide very valuable information about the reasons why employees leave organizations. However, many organizations simply collect the data, and fail to analyze and use it. EIS data should be shared with top executives for use as an organizational self assessment and in overall strategic planning.
- Employees participating in the EIS process must be assured of the confidentiality of their responses, particularly if exit interviews are conducted. Many employees are concerned about “burning their bridges,” knowing that they might seek reemployment in the future. They are also concerned about receiving negative job references, and possible reprisal against friends who still work for the organization.
- Organizations should have a formal EIS policy that is uniformly applied. The EIS should be an integral part of the formal “outprocessing”¹ that is expected by all departing employees. Just as employees expect to turn in their keys, identification cards, and laptop, they should understand that the organization values their feedback in the EIS process.

¹ We use the term, “outprocessing,” to mean the formal procedure an organization uses to officially conclude the employment relationship of a departing employee. Steps include: employees returning equipment (keys, ID cards, laptops); signing of “non-compete” agreements or any other formal documents; the completion of the exit interview; and any formal recognition of service contributions.

- Exit interviews and exit surveys each have their own specific advantages and disadvantages. The interview may provide richer information if a skilled interviewer asks probing questions and offers a setting where the departing employee can be formally thanked for their contributions to the organization. Although the interview usually has a higher response rate than the survey, the accuracy of the information may be compromised if the employee feels intimidated or simply chooses to remain passive in the process. Survey responses are easier to objectively quantify and track over time. Their greatest advantages are the assurance of confidentiality the process can provide, and the lower relative costs.

The FIA's Current EIS Process

In the mid 1990s, the FIA developed an exit survey that was intended to be completed by all children's services workers leaving the agency. Although the FIA provides most HR services centrally, they believe it is more practical for the local county offices to distribute the exit survey to departing workers. In most instances the central HR office is not even aware of an employee's departure until after the fact, when the local office sends the separation paperwork. FIA considered the option of mailing the exit survey to the employee's home as part of the separation processing procedure, but believed the response rate would be better if the survey were given before the employee departed.

For a variety of reasons, the EIS response rate has always been below 20%. Many of the local offices simply forget to give the exit survey to departing workers, and even when given, many employees fail to complete it. Under the current procedure, the employees are given the survey to complete and mail back at their convenience.

The completed surveys are tabulated in the FIA Office of Human Resources, but the summary reports are not regularly shared with upper management.

Recommendations for Process Improvement

1. The low response rate presents the opportunity for greatest improvement in FIA's exit survey process. We believe that the response rate could be improved by implementing some of the following alternatives and strategies:
 - Response rates are improved when organizations have well-established and uniformly applied EIS policies. Although the FIA has an EIS policy, it does not appear to be well established and uniformly applied. County office "personnel liaisons" or office managers are expected to provide the exit survey to departing children's services workers. FIA believes that the process is often overlooked because the majority of departing employees are not expected by policy to complete the exit survey. FIA might consider changing its policy so that exit surveys are given to all departing employees, irrespective of job classification.

- If the FIA wishes to continue limiting the EIS process to only children's services workers, they could improve the response rate by:
 - Periodically reminding county offices of the importance of the process.
 - Including a copy of the exit survey in the packet of separation papers that the OHR sends to all departing children's services workers. The transmittal letter would explain that the survey should be disregarded if the employee received one from their county personnel office.
 - If resources are available², conducting a telephone follow-up approximately two weeks after the departure date to ask if the survey has been returned. If not, the survey could be completed at that time by phone.
- 2. Since the exit survey data can be so valuable in identifying the reasons for employee turnover, we recommend that it be provided to upper management on an annual or semi-annual basis.
- 3. FIA's exit survey document is designed primarily to elicit responses about the dissatisfying aspects of the job. We would recommend balancing the exit survey by adding two questions, "What parts of your job did you find enjoyable and satisfying?" and "Would you recommend FIA as a potential employer to a friend?"

² FIA might consider using interns from its student intern program for this purpose.

Attachment 1 – FIA Child Welfare Worker Exit Questionnaire

**FAMILY INDEPENDENCE AGENCY (FIA)
CHILD WELFARE WORKER
EXIT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name (Confidential):

County Name:

What was the working title of your position?

(Check all that apply and assign an approximate percentage of time.)

- ☐ Foster Care Worker
- ☐ Children's Protective Services Worker
- ☐ Delinquency/Juvenile Justice Worker
- ☐ Adoption Worker
- ☐ Prevention Worker
- ☐ Adult Services Worker
- ☐ Other (Please Specify) _____

1. How long did you work in this position?

How long did you work for FIA?

0-1 years
1-2 years
2-3 years
3-4 years
4+ years

0-1 years
1-2 years
2-3 years
3-4 years
4+ years

2. Did you leave to take another job? Yes _____ No _____ (check one)

If yes, what is your new position? _____

What is the name of your new employer? _____

3. Please check each factor below that influenced your decision to leave your former position:

- a. _____ Court (judges, investigators, administrators, referees)
- b. _____ Attorneys
- c. _____ Collateral support personnel (psychologists, psychiatrists, medical, counselors)
- d. _____ Bureaucracy (paperwork and/or record keeping)
- e. _____ Red Tape (complex rules and policy)
- f. _____ Clients/Customers (Parents, Foster Parents, Youth, Children & other Adults)
- g. _____ Caseload size
- h. _____ Hours worked
- i. _____ Other agencies (cooperation, contact, etc.)
- j. _____ Supervision
- k. _____ Safety factors
- l. _____ Salary
- m. _____ Advancement
- n. _____ Training
- o. _____ Performance appraisals
- p. _____ Benefits (insurance, pension, 401(k), etc.)
- q. _____ Work-related injury
- r. _____ Work-related illness
- s. _____ Work-related stress
- t. _____ Retirement
- u. _____ Moving
- v. _____ Other (please explain)

4. Of the factors you checked in question 3, please select your top three choices (a, b, c, etc.):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Please explain how these factors influenced your decision to leave your position.

5. What improvements could be made to your former position to make it more satisfactory or more meaningful?

6. Please select the top three factors, if any, that would have kept you in your former position:

- | | | | |
|----|-------|---|----------------------------|
| a. | _____ | Better pay | Desired hourly rate: _____ |
| b. | _____ | Better benefits | |
| c. | _____ | Smaller caseload | |
| d. | _____ | More clerical support | |
| e. | _____ | Better treatment by superiors | |
| f. | _____ | More knowledge of the job and better support from supervision | |
| g. | _____ | Better environmental working conditions | |
| h. | _____ | Safer working environment | |
| i. | _____ | Other _____ | |

7. Why did you want to work at FIA in the first place and how did your decision to leave relate to how the Agency met your expectations?

Please provide an explanation for those items selected.

Comments:

Upon completion, please place this survey in the sealed envelope that is provided and return it to your office's Administrative Manager or designee. The survey will be forwarded to the Child and Family Services Administration for confidential tabulation.